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Conscious Coaching: The Art & Science of Building Buy-In

By Brett Bartholomew. Published by Bartholomew Publishing, LLC, Omaha, NE, 2017, 278 pp. ISBN: 9781543179477.

Reviewed by Joe Eisenmann, PhD, Director of High Performance & Education, USA Football.

Coaching is an art based upon science. A significant part of coaching is based upon sports science or what some call the “hard” sciences (e.g., exercise physiology and biomechanics). A colleague of mine, Tim Wakeham, who is the Director of Olympic Sports strength and conditioning at Michigan State University often refers to this as “neck down training”. The remaining piece to the performance puzzle involves “neck up” coaching. Some people may refer to this as mental skills or performance psychology required for optimal sports performance, but as a coach there is also the ability to connect with and inspire athletes to learn and perform. In this book, Brett Bartholomew outlines what is required to be a “conscious coach” through the art and science of building buy-in.

Brett’s background and experience is in the field of strength and conditioning. He has worked with several athletes and teams across military, collegiate, Olympic, and professional sport contexts. He seems to possess a growth mindset, reads widely, and integrates new lessons into his craft while continuing to share his knowledge and experience through invited lectures and consultations with professional organizations and businesses around the globe. He relies on this experience and his personal coaching philosophy and style in this book. Although much of the tome is aimed at strength and conditioning coaches, this book is pertinent to all sport coaches.

Prior to reading a book, I not only like to get to know the author but also examine the bibliography or references. As a scientist and scholar, I do not want to read something based solely on anecdotal tales. There are several key resources cited in the areas of human behavior, human interactions, sport psychology, and communication that support the rationale and methods to build trust between coach and athlete proposed by Bartholomew.

The forward of the book, written by legendary track and field coach Dan Pfaff, is impressive in itself and a testament to the importance of the “soft side” of coaching. The introduction of the book then opens with a proverb – *By wisdom a house is built and through understanding it is established*. I have translated this proverb into the following equation that I like to use to explain success:

(Coaching) Success = IQ + EQ + SQ. Again, it is not solely about the coach’s intelligence in the X’s and O’s but rather his/her emotional intelligence (EQ) and social intelligence (SQ), or ability to connect and communicate with people. Brett has done a masterful job of explaining the science and art of connecting with human beings emotionally and socially and seeing them as athletes (i.e., real actual people) and not as robots.

Bartholomew provides a system to coaching that begins with building trust or buy-in and establishing a relationship with the athletes. Building trust and establishing relationships hinges upon one’s social intelligence, or the ability to navigate, negotiate and influence social relationships and environments. Finally, it is important to understand that this process requires time and patience.

The process described above should be preceded by the coach first understanding themselves and is covered in Chapter 2—Know Thyself to Know Thy Athletes. Bartholomew bravely opens the pages to his own story and struggles as an adolescent to demonstrate the deep soul-searching required to fully understand yourself in order to better understand how you think, react, communicate, and ultimately, coach. Brett offers his method of self-awareness of internal identification which entails reflection—questioning who you are; inspection—examining who you are; and progression—owning who you are. Besides this exercise, one can also get to know themselves through common personality assessments such as the Myers-Briggs, DISC, and others covered in the book. An overview of the key characteristics and disadvantages of each of personality assessment tool is provided. Of course, once these self-awareness exercises are completed, one should consider a follow-up plan and strategy.

Once we understand ourselves as coaches and as an individual person, we can now begin to understand our athletes. However, Bartholomew emphasizes we should understand them as people first, and athletes second. Understanding each athlete and his/her unique personality and what drives them will enable you to coach them as individuals instead of delivering homogenized messages to the entire team. Brett provides an overview of what

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drives or motivates individuals. It is perhaps best stated in this sentence “Purpose is a performance enhancer, and it’s our job to help the athletes find it” (p.81). A section on conflict follows. Why? As long as we are dealing with humans, we will encounter conflict; therefore, we should understand how to deal with conflict (e.g., conflict management).

The major portion of the book is dedicated to describing Bartholomew’s sixteen archetypes—the Technician, Royal, Soldier, Specialist, Politician, Novice, Leader, Self-Sabotager, Mouthpiece, Wolverine, Free Spirit, Manipulator, Underdog, Crusader, Skeptic, and Hypochondriac. An overview of each archetype is provided along with strengths and weaknesses, and how to connect with the archetype. As an example, the Mouthpiece is the chatterbox. They can be positive or negative, but they always will be heard and thus easily identifiable. Because they are so busy talking, the Mouthpiece often lacks focus and is likely insecure, hence the reason for talking. To connect with the Mouthpiece, the coach should get inside their head. Brett also invited one coach to provide a real life, practical example for each archetype.

Chapter 4 provides a what-not-to-do checklist based on Brett’s experience as a coach. In turn, he then shares his must how-to list on trust, or what are called the ‘Trust Tenets’. It is worth mentioning a few of the ‘trust tenets’ here: fundamentals not fluff, educate, humor, authenticity, empathy, delivery and persuasion, and autonomy. If you want to know how to be an effective communicator, teacher and coach, there are several excellent practical implications in this chapter such as focusing on “fundamentals not fluff” and the use of humor.

The final chapter addresses how we can practice conscious coaching beyond the athlete. Besides understanding our athletes, we also need to have positive interactions with other coaches and staff members, young coaches and students, and with our family. Bartholomew addresses the issue of managing one’s ego and emotions. In addition, the importance of mentoring other coaches and students in the profession is addressed. Bartholomew

highlights the commitment required by both the mentor and the student, and that it is a two-way street.

The appendix is noteworthy as the research on coach-athlete relationships by Dr. Sophia Jowett is highlighted. More specifically, the 3 + 1 Cs framework which examines closeness, complementarity, commitment, and co-orientation is summarized. This provides an excellent framework and compliment to this book, and again, shows Bartholomew’s acumen for bridging research into practice.

Bartholomew uses analogies and tells stories throughout the book, which is highly effective. For example, when describing the importance of patience when establishing buy-in, he states “There’s a reason why the best tasting foods cook the longest; it allows all the ingredients to blend together in order to bring out the true essence of dish” (p. 20). Bartholomew is a master storyteller spinning lessons into stories to convey concepts and model an approach that should be utilized by coaches as well. Brain scans reveal that stories stimulate and engage the human brain, helping the speaker (i.e., coach) connect with the audience (i.e., athlete) and making it much more likely that the audience will agree with the speaker’s point of view. In essence, the audience will trust you.

In summary, coaches often focus upon physical, technical and tactical aspects. However, in order for an athlete to learn and master a skill, or execute the game plan or strength and conditioning program, the coach must first establish trust and build a relationship with the athlete. This entails knowing the athlete as a person first, effectively communicating, and motivating the athletes. It is also important to note that effective communication is a two-way street, and coaches often forget to listen or just listen poorly. Coaches also need to understand that it is not only what you say, but how you say it. The principles of human behavior and interaction discussed in this book should be read, understood, and most importantly, practiced by all coaches to ensure a quality experience that optimizes learning and performance for the athlete.